

Extreme Makeover: If All Else Fails, Call the Carpenter!
Isaiah 43: 16-21, Philippians 3: 4b-14, John 12: 1-8
March 25, 2007

We are such creatures of habit, aren't we? The good news of this phase of our sanctuary is that the chancel floor refinishing is done and that we can actually get up here to the choir loft and platform. But to get up here we had to change our route in and out of the platform. Change is hard for us humans. More about that a little later... As I make my way out to you this morning to check out my spiritual toolbox this morning I have to tell you a story of what happened to me two weeks ago as we were preparing to leave for Spring Break. Spring was springing – did you notice that everything is blooming at the same time this year? – and I wanted to apply one of God's greatest miracles – *Miracle Gro* – on all my plants and flowers. The only problem is that my sprinkler nozzle that I had to swap out was frozen on my hose. I thought, "no problem!" I have all these new wrenches and gadgets. I have WD-40. A little rust is no match for my toolbox. But it was. I tried every tool in my box. I applied WD-40. I tried everything and couldn't get that sprinkler nozzle off so I could put on my new high-tech *Miracle Gro* applicator. I had given up. I even said a little prayer. One last manual turn and the sprinkler head slipped off that hose like butter on butter. Wow! Despite all my efforts in applying all my new tools it was as if some mysterious force had loosened the sprinkler head from that hose.

Now the psalmist that I shared with our children this morning would have said, "God, do it again!" God, use the methods of our shared history to free that sprinkler head. But it didn't happen the same way. In all of our spiritual makeovers sometimes the old tools that we have learned do not work for us for God is doing a new thing. We have

looked at the design tools, the hammer of justice, the super glue of reconciliation, but sometimes, if all else fails, we just need to call on the carpenter. We need to search out God for the new things that God is doing. This doesn't fit with our "head" religion but I have found it to be true. Einstein said it in secularist, humanist terms better than I could. Einstein, the greatest physicist of the twentieth century said, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." That says to me, in spiritual terms, that we have to always be refreshing our toolbox with the new things of the Spirit.

If you are scientifically minded, consider this. Some of the greatest innovations that have affected the most people in our modern world were not invented or discovered using the same thinking of the past. Let me give you a few examples:

Frank Epperson was but a young lad of eleven, when he accidentally came up with what some would later describe as the most important invention of the twentieth century. Who would say that exactly I'm not sure, but Lady Luck was surely smiling the day Frank, mixed himself a drink of soda water powder and water- a popular drink back in 1905. For some reason he never got round to drinking it and left it on the back porch overnight with the stirring stick still in it. Of course, when the temperature dropped overnight, the mixture froze and Frank had a stick of frozen soda water to show his friends at school. Eighteen years later, Frank remembered the incident and started producing what he called 'Epsicles' in seven fruit flavors. The name never took off, but today over three million 'Popsicles' are sold every year.

In the early 1940's, Swiss inventor George de Mestral was walking his dog. When he got home, he noticed his dog's coat and his pants were covered with cockleburrs.

When he took a closer look under the microscope he discovered their natural hook-like shape. He recognized the potential for a new fastener, but it took him eight years to perfect the invention. Eventually he developed two strips of nylon fabric, one containing thousands of small hooks, just like the burrs, and the other with soft loops, just like the fabric of his pants. When the two strips were pressed together, they formed a strong bond, but one that's easily separated, lightweight, durable, and washable. Voila Velcro!

In 1970, Spencer Silver was working at the 3M research labs trying to develop a strong adhesive. What he actually came up with, was weaker than what had already been developed. It stuck, but then it easily unstuck. That seemed like a pretty useless invention, until 4 years later when a colleague was singing in the church choir. He used markers to keep place in the hymnal but they kept falling out. So he coated them with Spencer's glue. They stayed in place but came off easily without damaging the pages. The "Post-it note" was born and today they are a nuisance in just about every office around the world. In fact, did you know that the most crucial information in the world is not stored on mainframe, super or networked computers – it is stuck to the many computer screens as post-it notes! These are but a few examples. The fact is that most of the innovations – whether they be breakthrough drugs like penicillin or time-saving inventions came about when we were not using the scientific tools of the past. Many have been discovered in places we have never been in outer space and new places in our minds.

God often takes us to new, spiritual places in this way as well. The really breakthrough moments for us as a people of God and as individuals comes from where God is doing an entirely new thing! Our three texts show us this reality. Isaiah shows us the difference of what God did in the exodus versus the exile. Isaiah remembered the

time when the Hebrew people were literally trapped – between the Red Sea and the oncoming Egyptians who were bent on destroying them. They needed an escape. So God not only parted the waters, but in the process the Egyptians followed and they were drowned as the waters returned. But in Isaiah's time a new problem existed. The Hebrew people had been exported out of their country, their temple destroyed, and after fifty or so years, they were free to return. What would God do in this instance? Some would return and reform the temple and live as before. But most would not return. What would bind them together as a people living forever in foreign lands? The answer is that God made them "people of the book." They had Jewish law to bind them together culturally and in belief and practice. That people of the book has survived persecution and holocaust and holds together in community today. God did a new thing to bind God's people together. The exodus did not pose the same problem in salvation history as the exile.

The letter to the Philippians was penned by one of the great people of God's book. Saul, no doubt named after the first Hebrew king, was the Jew of all Jews. He was circumcised on the eighth day, the man who descended from Benjamin, the most loyal of all God's tribes. He was a teacher of the law from the learned class of Pharisees. He was of the best stock of person. Notice all the economic language that Paul uses – stock, gain, count, wealth. Saul had it all. But here he tells us that it was all dung on the trash heap. It was all worthless to him. His tools of his spiritual trade were useless. In one revelatory moment God in Christ convinced him that nothing was more important than simple faith. He traded in his allegiance to works righteousness for simple faith. The fallacy in works righteousness is that any human being can actually and consistently meet

the requirements of any moral code. We simply cannot. The moral law cannot be met in entirety. We cannot achieve righteousness with God on our own. In the end all of our tools really fail us! Paul says to us, “all else will fail, so call the carpenter!”

We see the carpenter in action in our gospel lesson from John. This is a very strange scene. Jesus has been invited to a banquet, just days before the Passover by his good friends in Bethany – Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Now Jesus loved all of these friends very much – but he had a special fondness for Mary. Mary has sat at the feet of Jesus to hear his teachings. She had special eyes and heart of faith and trusted in Jesus’ teachings of his impending death and resurrection. I am sure his words “I am the resurrection and the life” still rung in her brain. So what does she do for this occasion – something totally new and outrageous, really non-rational. She opens a jar of very expensive perfume and anoints his body for burial. But she doesn’t anoint his head; she wipes the nard on his feet with her hair. Imagine this scene which foreshadows the foot washing that Jesus will lead the disciples through in the upper room. This nard would have been worth lots of money and Mary was wildly extravagant with her love. She does an act of incredible humility – not anointing the head but instead Jesus’ feet – and she lets down her hair, which would have been a shameful act for a woman of her day in Palestine. The sights and smells of pistachio oil would have been remarkable. Judas complains that this is a senseless, extravagant act and the money from selling the nard could have been used to serve the poor. Jesus says to them that they should leave Mary alone for she was preparing Jesus for his burial, that the poor will always be with you, and that Jesus will soon be gone. Now you and I with proper motivations might have said the same thing as Judas. It was the logical thing to do – to use this precious gift to

help the poor. This nard would have made a great silent auction item at *Oodles of Noodles*, wouldn't it? Mary represents the wild and irrational. Martha is the reasoned, practical response. Sometimes God calls us to partner with God to do new, wild, crazy things so that Jesus will be revealed among us.

So how does the carpenter speak to us when all of our trusted tools have failed? When we lift up our prayers to God, when we simply don't know what's next, how do we know when God is doing a new thing? Sure, these stories suggest that we need to stop breaking our pick in barren soil. These stories say that we are to keep running the race, to keep our eye on the prize and that retirement is not an option for the Christian. These stories say to simply enjoy the aroma of Jesus' ministry in our midst. Those are words that we need to hear and encouragement for a new day. But how do we know that God is doing a new thing and that we need to join in and head a new direction? I am convinced that our calling stands at the intersection of our heart's greatest passion and the need that we see right before our faces. I suggested two weeks ago that for us in this time and place that need is to minister to GLBT youth, both homeless *and* those who have a house to live in but not a home in which they are truly welcome. At this intersection we can never know immediately that we have found "it." But here is where God does her best work. Little by little over time we will have persistent, consistent God moments where doors are opened, resources suddenly appear, hearts catch fire and results that we can't explain and certainly can't take credit for begin to happen. So be encouraged as we go forward in our discernment process. Put your ear to the ground and look inside your own heart. For it is in these quiet places that the Spirit will blow gently but unmistakably in the direction we must go.

